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## GOETHE'S INFLUENCE ON CARLYLE.

F. MELIAN STAWELL.

## II.

FOR Goethe then, and for Carlyle after him, it was a fundamental belief that man was here to perform a work of greater value than his own mere enjoyment of it (or of anything else). But what was that work? Wherein did it lie? In nothing more nor less, according to Goethe, than in the positive development of his own dormant faculties. In simply working at that, a man could be embodying something of infinite value, incarnating a Divine Idea, clothing it in his way as nature clothed it in hers. And this eternal work could be, must be, set on foot here and now; for the web of accident and circumstance was woven by the same Force that was calling on men to actualize themselves in and through this apparently truceless war with its own appearance. Because of this underlying union Trouble could further the divine work, and because Trouble could do that, the 'Worship of Sorrow' became possible.

Doubtless this conception was, as we say, 'in the air' throughout Germany. Other writers, notably Fichte and Novalis, are full of it.<sup>1</sup> "The true Shekinah is Man," wrote Novalis, and Carlyle was never tired of quoting the saying.

But it was Goethe who worked out this conception in detail, at once in his own life, in his art, and in his didactic writings. He really believed it, and he really acted on it. It sounds all through the wild fire-music of *Faust*, it underlies the steady prose of *Wilhelm Meister*, it sings in the sweet lyrics of his own heart. The whole theory of education and life in *Wilhelm Meister* is based on the essential

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<sup>1</sup> See Carlyle on Fichte: "State of German Literature." Critical Essays, I.

community of Manhood and Godhead.<sup>2</sup> When Goethe is solemn, his faith turns the whole universe into a temple; when he laughs,—and he possesses laughter,—it comes home to us with a delicious freshness that makes it the more believable because so far away from all cant and priggishness. “If God had wanted me different,” he can say with a smile, “no doubt he would have made me so. He gave me talent, and that means he lent me much. So I use it right and left, though what is to come of it, who can say? But He will nod, when I ought to stop.”<sup>3</sup>

Carlyle, always singularly sensitive to personality (perhaps too sensitive for his own peace in the intercourse of daily life), was more than fascinated and thrilled, he was inspired for life by the vision in his own time and era of a man actually developing his powers in a harmony that the soul could recognize as divine. Our ordinary level of imagination and emotion is so low we find it hard to realize that Carlyle actually felt this about Goethe, but he did.

“And knowest thou no Prophet, even in the vesture, environment and dialect of this age? None to whom the Godlike had revealed itself, through all meanest and highest forms of the Common; . . . in whose inspired melody, even in these rag-gathering and rag-burning days, Man’s Life again begins, were it but afar off, to be divine? Knowest thou none such? I know him, and name him—Goethe.” (“Sartor,” Bk. iii, c. vii.)

The extraordinary richness and diversity of Goethe’s own nature in itself would have arrested Carlyle: ‘the hunger for eternity’ that was in him made him always

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the words of the uncle to the *schöne Seele* in Part II, Bk. vi. And the whole of the passage about “the Three Reverences” in the “Wanderjahre.”

<sup>3</sup> Hätte Gott mich anders gewollt,  
So hätt’ er mich anders gebaut;  
Da er mir aber Talent gezollt,  
Hat er mir viel vertraut.  
Ich brauch’ es zur Rechten and Linken,  
Weiss nicht was daraus kommt;  
Wenn’s nicht mehr frommt  
Wird er schon winken.—*Zahme Xenien*.

revolt from the puny and shallow; and whatever anyone might think about Goethe, no one could consider him either little or thin. This personal richness had its counterpart in the vast conception that underlies "Wilhelm Meister." Goethe's width of view is shown in two ways: in the first place, the infinite worth is conceived as many-sided, full of aspects which cannot be reduced to one another, though they are all connected in the whole, so that it might be compared to a many-faceted crystal, but never to a mere straight line. Carlyle learnt his lesson from Goethe far too well to conceive duty as a little narrow code of good behavior, something that could be summed up once for all in any Ten Commandments. He, like Goethe, would have put the command, "Thou shalt make that which is beautiful," side by side with the bidding, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." There is a remarkable passage in "Wilhelm Meister," (Part II, Bk. viii, c. vii), where the Abbé, living the life of strenuous culture, tries to explain how a work of art should be judged for itself and not for any extraneous benefit. The whole drift of this passage, which contains the essence of what is true and avoids what is false in the gospel of art for art's sake, is faithfully reflected in Carlyle's account of the theory of beauty held in Germany, ("State of German Literature," C. E., Vol. I, p. 47). After speaking of poetic beauty as essentially "underived from anything external or of merely intellectual origin," he goes on:

Art is to be loved, not because of its effects, but because of itself: not because it is useful for spiritual pleasure, or even for moral culture, but because it is Art, and the highest in man, and the soul of all Beauty. To inquire after its *utility* would be like inquiring after the *utility* of a God, or, what to the Germans would sound stranger than it does to us, the *utility* of Virtue and Religion.

In the next place, it is fundamental with Goethe that this many-sided divine idea must be embodied in many men; one individual alone cannot avail. A true incarnation needs not one man but mankind. The Absolute cannot spare one of them. This, of course, is really in-

volved in the original conception of the infinite as dwelling in every soul; but Goethe's genius was of the kind, at once creative and critical, that could embody the conception in a whole gallery of characters, and at the same time comment on their significance, and so press home the idea for us with a steady weight that in the end is irresistible. He knew well how rare it was to find a conception as broad as his own. We agree to it with our lips, but for the life of us we cannot, at least not on our ordinary level, think there is much use in the 'unemployable.' But for Goethe no one was unemployable. He would have reversed the saying of Napoleon, and declared he knew no man who was *not* necessary. What is written in the roll? ("Wilhelm Meister," Part II, Bk. viii, c. 5.) "Nur alle Menschen machen die Menschheit aus, nur alle Kräfte zusammengenommen die Welt."

Mankind can only be made by all men, the world by all its powers together. Often enough they war among themselves, but even as they try to destroy each other, Nature holds them together and brings them forth again. From the first animal impulse toward construction up to the highest exercise of intellectual art, from the laughter and shouts of childhood up to the glorious utterance of the orator and the singer, from the first scuffles of boyhood up to the huge armaments by which nations are lost and won, from the faintest kindness and the most transitory affection up to the most burning passion and the deepest bond; from the merest sensation of the tangible Present up to the most mysterious presentiments and hopes for the furthest spiritual Future, all this, and far more, lies in man, and must be brought out and unfolded: only not in one man, but in many. Every capacity is important, and all must be developed. One individual can only work for the Beautiful, another only for the Useful: but both are needed to make a man.<sup>4</sup>

There has never been a gospel more weighty and more inspiring than this. The studiously prosaic tone of "Meister" only makes its message the more impressive. That dull, stupid, frivolous setting, that "gute Gesellschaft" where there seemed not the faintest opportunity for poetry, it is there, after all, that poets are made. Goethe takes modern life at its meanest and most com-

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<sup>4</sup> Slightly altered from Carlyle's translation.

monplace, and shows how the great work of realizing the noblest capacities of every self, which is also the work of obeying the laws of God, goes forward there as much as anywhere. "Hier oder nirgend ist Amerika."

Moreover, he shows *how* it is to go forward. It is through work. This is where Carlyle's gospel of work joins into Goethe's gospel of self-expression and self-realization. The two things really coincide, both springing from the root-conception of spiritual activity as the goal of man. Anyone who is in earnest about self-culture knows that it is vanity of vanities, "vapor and feeding on wind," without incessant work. Now Goethe and Carlyle were both desperately in earnest; mere 'pious aspirations,' weak dilettanteism,—'playing with empty nuts' out of which the kernel had gone,—all this was anathema to them both. The capacities could only be realized by definite work. Till then they were only elements, only potentialities. Man's business was to determine himself, to stamp himself upon things, and how was this to be done?

Life lies before us, like a great mass of stone before an architect, an architect who only deserves that name when out of this fortuitous mass he has produced a form sprung from his own soul. . . . Everything outside us is only our material; yes, I might even say, everything in us; but deep within us lies the creative force (*Kraft*) which out of these can produce what they were meant to be, and which leaves us neither sleep nor rest until we have produced it, outside us or within ourselves, in one way or the other. (W. M., Pt. II, Bk. vi, *ad fin.*)

"The painfullest feeling," writes Sartor, "is that of your own Feebleness (*Unkraft*). . . . And yet of your Strength there is and can be no clear feeling, save by . . . what you have done. Between vague wavering Capability and fixed indubitable Performance, what a difference! A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, '*Know thyself*'; till it be translated into this partially possible one, '*Know what thou canst work at.*'" ("Sartor," Bk. ii, c. vii.)

This was Goethe's teaching through and through; no one was more averse than he to self-inspection, no one more determined on self-realization, no one more con-

vinced that the self only became real through the work of production. Education should not stir desires, it should awaken capacities; and there was no such thing on earth as a capacity without a definite character. "Es giebt keine unbestimmte Fähigkeit." (W. M., Bk. viii, c. iii.)

So that there was a double side to all work: every man had some capacity that pushed him to some definite bit of production,—it might be the taming of horses, it might be the writing of poems,—but none could know what that capacity was until he had tried it in action. 'The born painter' could not tell what painting was until he had the brush in his hand. Nothing is more misleading than to take Goethe's precept, "Do what lies nearest to thee," as though it meant to keep to the station in which one is placed by accident.<sup>5</sup> His real meaning, as the whole of *Wilhelm Meister* shows, is to work without delay at what one believes oneself best fitted for. The belief may be mistaken, but the best remedy for such a mistake is "to drain it to the dregs" (W. M., Part II, Bk. vii, c. x). Experience is the only schoolmaster, and Wilhelm did quite right to try his hand at the stage, utterly unfitted for it though he was. It would have been as wrong for him not to try it when he honestly thought it his *métier* as it would have been absurd to go on with it when Jarno made him see the unpleasant truth. The work you are best fit for, that, small or great in itself, is always the greatest thing in the world for you. Both Goethe and Carlyle were bound to remember this.

It might be said that sometimes Carlyle forgot it, and was fiercely intolerant of work that lay outside his own province, but in fact it is extraordinary how catholic his sympathies really were. From Voltaire to Hodge, from Dante to Mirabeau, almost any genuine toil won his passionate welcome. The common sneer at the man who sang the praises of silence in forty volumes, is based on the

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<sup>5</sup> Goethe himself, it should be granted, may have used it later in this sense when inveighing against revolutionaries. But his original meaning lay far deeper.

most foolish misunderstanding of what was one of the greatest things about him. His own chosen work lay in the realm of written speech,—and never did any man more rightly choose his work,—but that did not make him forget that the men who could not talk at all or write a line were just as indispensable as he. It is the same type of cheap criticism that would have us dismiss as an egoist the man who could say at the end of his life that he knew no more delightful experience than to see some work that one had planned in youth for oneself carried out later by another. From this point of view at least, Goethe was quite justified in repelling the charge of egoism with scornful laughter:

Ich, Egoist? Wenn ich's nicht besser wüsste!  
Der Neid, das ist der Egoiste.

No envy dwelt in that large nature of his. The beautiful signature of his letter to Carlyle, “*treu teilnehmend und mitwirkend*,” is genuinely characteristic; and the serenity of his disposition made it possible for him actually to take part with, and work with, other men in a way that Carlyle could never have done.

Of course it must not be denied that the fiery impatience of Carlyle's temperament, acting on this gospel of self-realization through work, did lead him away from the calm tolerance of Goethe. If men would not work, they must be forced to. If it was right to save a man by force from drowning, much more was it right so to save him from idleness. So much has been said against Carlyle for his scorn of political freedom that it is not necessary to labor this point, but it is only fair to add that he did not and could not forget that the goal was spiritual freedom for all men. The born democrat can drink deeply of Carlyle and only find his democratic fervor strengthened. For the ideal of self-determination set before every man is really the root of the matter, and no one had a more tremendous vision of that ideal than Carlyle. Like lightning from heaven the unspeakable dignity of the



Divine Idea flashes round every man, even the most ridiculous, "a forked straddling animal with bandy legs, yet also a Spirit, and unutterable Mystery of Mysteries." To Carlyle, a man could never be a machine for which we need only ask that it should be kept going right. Spirit could not be spirit till it was *free*, till it not only *went* right but *did* right, not because it was told, but because it saw for itself that right was right. Only we never find in Carlyle what we do find in Goethe, and what is necessary to complete the democratic faith, the insistence on freedom as a *means*, the conception that a man can find the right way best by being allowed to go wrong in looking for it himself.

At the same time it must be remembered that Goethe also had scant sympathy, if any, with the war-cries for political liberty in his day. Those 'apostles of freedom' seemed to him only to want the freedom of doing what they liked. Goethe's indifferentism to the great revolutions of his time is indeed much harder to explain than Carlyle's invective: for Goethe had not Carlyle's savage impatience and he did have the conception of freedom as a means. Moreover, Carlyle's attacks against democracy were, more than half the time, directed against the sheer individualism of the Manchester School: he saw, what they did not, that through the inveterate distrust of government, nominal political freedom might mean nothing but crushing economic slavery, whereas Goethe's distrust of revolution seems only based on his dislike to confusion and upheaval, on his sense that political institutions were only, after all, the scaffolding of life, and on his belief that government, as such, was a highly technical art.

Often enough the reader is fain to quote against Goethe as against Carlyle, the words that Carlyle himself translated from Novalis concerning Christianity. Of that Religion, so profoundly honored by all three, Novalis says roundly: "It is the root of *all Democracy*, the highest Facts in the Rights of man, (die höchste That-

sache der Popularität); ("Novalis," C. E., Vol. II, p. 219.)

But, of course, it is not for us to teach these men, it is they who have taught us, that the highest of all the reverences is the reverence for oneself. Three stages there are in religion, so Wilhelm Meister is told, and the well-known passage may be summarized here: the reverence for the absolute standard above us, the perfect ideal after which we search; the reverence for the common hard facts below us, the medium through which, and through which alone, we are to realize it; and the third and greatest of all, the reverence for oneself, the self in which the ideal becomes real, and conscious that it is real. The only quarrel a democrat need have at bottom with Carlyle or Goethe is that they keep a man overlong in the posture of the first. It is the stress on the two last reverences, after all, that is of supreme importance, as Carlyle saw, and here one can no longer avoid the most difficult and the most alluring part of the whole subject.

The intimate union of the three reverences seems to imply that in a sense, perhaps in more senses than one, the ideal is not complete until it is actualized here on earth in space and time. If earth needs heaven, so also does heaven need earth. So universal, so indispensable to every action of ours is the perception, "It is better for a good thing to exist than not to exist," that we hardly ever realize it is a perception at all. Yet it is not only such, but one which, fundamental as it is, cannot, it would appear, even be stated in an imperfect world without paradox. For it would seem to follow that the perfect ideal is *not* perfect until it is actualized through time. Does there lie here, one is tempted to ask, that secret want in the infinite ideal itself, which drives it to create the world? But to speak like this may only be to escape from a mystery by a metaphor.

With a sense of the mystery, at any rate, both Goethe and Carlyle are penetrated through and through. To Carlyle that a thing should *happen* is always of unspeak-

able moment. Take, out of a thousand possible illustrations, this passage from the *Essay on Biography* (C. E., Vol. IV, p. 61):

Boswell relates this in itself smallest and poorest of occurrences: "As we walked along the Strand to-night, arm in arm, a woman of the town accosted us in the usual enticing manner. 'No, no, my girl,' said Johnson, 'it won't do.' He however did not treat her with harshness; we talked of the wretched life of such women." Strange power of *Reality*! Not even this poorest of occurrences but now, after seventy years have come and gone, has a meaning for us. Do but consider that it is *true*; that it did, in very deed, occur! That unhappy outcast with all her sins and woes,—*she* is no longer here, but far from us, in the bosom of Eternity,—whence we too came, whither we too are bound! . . . No high Calista, that ever issued from story-teller's brain, will impress us more deeply than this meanest of the mean; and for a good reason: That *she* issued from the Maker of Men.

How could the man who wrote this help becoming an historian? History to him was the record of the union between the natural and the supernatural; and that, take it how we will, is the supreme business of the universe. His worship of forceful personalities grew from the same root. Force of spirit, above all, must be needed to incarnate the Divine in fact. Such force could be turned to evil, but it was essential to good. Flame was flame, as Browning would have said, wherever found, and Carlyle, like Goethe, sprang to welcome it wherever he saw it. Napoleon had the same attraction for them both; and there is no more profound analysis of sheer elemental power in character than Goethe's account of what he meant by 'the daimonic' in man. No doubt this passion for personal force led Carlyle astray, and aided that idolatry of despotism noticed above. One might quote Novalis against him again (especially in view of modern developments): "The ideal of Morality has no more dangerous rival than the ideal of highest Strength, of the most powerful life." But here again, to understand Carlyle's fundamental position is to free oneself from his quite subordinate errors. What the ideal wants is the free coöperation of *all* men, not the

dominance of a few. "Behind us, behind each one of us, lie Six Thousand Years of human effort, human conquest: before us is the boundless Time, with its as yet uncreated and unconquered Continents and Eldorados, which we, even we, have to conquer, to create; and from the bosom of Eternity there shine for us celestial guiding stars."<sup>6</sup>

We have to create that Eldorado, and yet in some sense it is already there, above us, and guiding us. The double conviction is essential to Carlyle and to Goethe. In *what* sense the unrealized ideal is already in the bosom of Eternity, complete and incomplete at once, they do not say, and I do not pretend to understand. But that they did hold the double conviction is clear. In the wonderful "Tale of Tales" Goethe outdoes himself in symbols for the separation and the union between the "two halves of one dissevered world," the natural and the supernatural: the unpossessed ideal, like a fair maiden sitting spell-bound, and lonely, across the mysterious river; and the practical will, the king's son, formed for action, wandering miserably on the hither side, both of them wretched apart, one perishing, the other unable to give life, until they are united in that temple of human religion which can only be built in the actual world, and only when the bridge is built that spans eternity and time.

So much, at least, we can gather from this most solemn and most delightful of all fairy-tales, as from the whole drift of Goethe, that we human beings cannot definitely know what the ideal is except through struggling step by step to actualize it in time and space. And yet, somehow, and most surely, in the structure of ourselves and in the universe definite principles are involved. The ideal is not sheer indefiniteness to which we could give any turn we liked. Thus the conception has everything that is inspiring in Pragmatism,—the sense of the undiscovered

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<sup>6</sup>"Characteristics," C. E., Vol. IV, p. 38. There follow, significantly, two lines from Goethe:

My inheritance, how wide and fair!

Time is my fair seed-field, of Time I'm heir!

land below the horizon, of "the dim splendor ever on before," of the need and worth of human effort,—and yet it escapes the deadly chill of a doctrine that would dissolve truth itself into whatever it pleased us to invent. The whole significance of the time-process would lie in this gradual conquest of Eldorados, in this gradual filling-up for us of the content that gave body to the ideal. So vast is the work that it takes not only all men but all time; and era must follow era before it is done. Kings succeed kings in the "Tale of Tales," and Carlyle cried out that the French Revolution was a new fact, not to be subsumed under any old formula.<sup>7</sup> The belief that the infinite ideal had a definite character, that it could only be realized along certain lines, gave both Carlyle and Goethe a steady scale of value. Important as it was that a thing should happen, not all happenings were of equal importance. Those that most fully realized the ideal, those alone at bottom were "worth remembering": the rest only "needed to be well forgotten." So that history never became for Carlyle, and never could become, an indifferent chronicle. His was not the 'philosophy' that thought Stupidity had the same rank, and claimed the same place, as Intellect in the world's history, like the theory at which Goethe laughed:

Was kluges, dummes, je geschah,  
Sie nennt es Welt-Historia.

Most enthusiastically, one fancies, Carlyle must have welcomed Goethe's impatient, glorious cry:

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"'Fr. Rev.," Bk. v., c. i. "But what if History were to admit, for once, that all the Names and Theorems yet known to her fall short? That this grand Product of Nature was even grand, and new, in that it came not to range itself under old recorded Laws of Nature at all, but to disclose new ones?"

Compare the words on the passing of Puritanism in "Cromwell" (25 May, 1658): "My friend, Puritanism was *not* the Complete Theory of this immense Universe; no, only a part thereof." And see "Sartor," Bk. iii, c. vii: "Generations are as the Days of Toilsome Mankind: . . . Thus all things wax and roll onward, etc."

Nichts vom Vergänglichem  
 Wie's auch geschah!  
 Uns zu verewigen  
 Sind wir ja da!—*Zahme Xenien, I.*

“To make ourselves immortal,” that was what we were here for, in Goethe's eyes, as long ago in Aristotle's, and we can afford to let the transitory go its way without a word.

In this imperfect and temporal world, of course, everything might in a sense be called transitory (*das Vergängliche*), but then in every faithful attempt there was something of the eternal too. The deepest springs of humor and pathos draw from the sense of this double fact, inadequacy everywhere, and, underlying the inadequacy, essential union with the supremely adequate. Ludicrous, pitiful shred as our best attempts appear compared with the infinite, yet *we* are infinite too, and perhaps we never feel it more than when we laugh and sigh over our own failures.<sup>8</sup> There is no need to say that Carlyle, of all historians, was master of humor and pathos; but perhaps it is not always recognized that both issued from his religious faith. Both are always at his side, but with Goethe they are often lost in triumph, the positive, as it were, swallowing up the negative. Inadequacy disappears in its own promise of the adequate. Goethe does not smile or sigh over the man “who desires the impossible,” he simply loves him: “Den lieb'ich, der Unmögliches begehrt.” The whole of the last stanza in *Faust* is full of this overflowing confidence. Often as it has been quoted, one cannot do better than end with it. Its deep likeness to the thought of both Plato and Aristotle is striking. In those realms above the heaven, everything transitory is seen as a symbol of something more; in that world of fulfillment the inadequate itself becomes fulfilled, mere potentiality opens out into act: the inexpressible is expressed at last, and for the union between the two,

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<sup>8</sup>This point was first made clear to me by A. C. Bradley. See his “Shakespearean Tragedy” and “Oxford Lectures on Poetry.”

between the desire and the desired, between the actual and the ideal, Goethe takes once more the metaphor that Aristotle had taken before him, the metaphor that has so often symbolized the deepest union hoped for between the Self and its Other,—a union so intense that identity seems a poor word,—the metaphor of love between man and woman. All this, and much more, is condensed into eight brief verses. Short and sharp, “like a thunder-peal,” as Seeley says of the last words in the Maurer-Loge, the sudden lines roll out:

Alles Vergängliche  
Ist nur ein Gleichniss;  
Das Unzulängliche  
Hier wird's Ereigniss;  
Das Unbeschreibliche,  
Hier ist es gethan;  
Das Ewig-Weibliche  
Zieht uns hinan.

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## THE QUESTION OF MORAL OBLIGATION.

RALPH BARTON PERRY.

ONE of the principal sources of embarrassment in philosophy is the asking of meaningless questions. Since philosophy is not, like science, permitted to enjoy a limited liability, it is supposed that a philosopher may rightly be called on to reply to any sentence beginning with an interrogative pronoun. But there are many such questions that do not define real problems, and that therefore have no place in rational discourse. This is true especially of sentences formed by introducing the adverb ‘why’ at the head of propositions already stated. No one who has had intimate acquaintance with small children can be ignorant of the facility with which such pseudo-questions are ejaculated by the vocal organs. It is true that a child can ask questions which the wise men